



March 20, 2017

IOWA BULLETIN NO. IA360-17-15

SUBJECT: PER – CONDUCTING MID-YEAR PROGRESS REVIEWS FOR FISCAL YEAR
(FY) 2017

ACTION REQUIRED BY: APRIL 17, 2017

PURPOSE. To remind managers and supervisors of the requirements for conducting formal mid-year progress reviews for employees for fiscal year (FY) 2017 by April 30, 2017.

EXPIRATION DATE. September 30, 2018

Supervisors are required to meet with their employees to conduct periodic progress reviews throughout the year. National Bulletin 360-17-20, PER- Conducting Mid-year Progress Reviews for Fiscal Year 2017, dated March 16, 2017, has been issued and provides important guidance that should be followed during this mid-year performance progress review process.

In order to ensure compliance, with this guidance all NRCS employees in Iowa will have a progress review completed and documented in EmpowHR by close of business on Monday, April 17, 2017. (Exception – Any employee not on an approved plan must be placed on one immediately and must receive a review no later than May 31, 2017). **Mid-year progress reviews are considered complete when signatures from both the supervisor and employee have been entered electronically into EmpowHR prior to the April 17, 2017, deadline.**

- **Note: Employees must check the block that indicates they have reviewed the plan and they must hit “save” at the bottom in order to have their electronic signature recorded.**

In order to meet this deadline, the supervisor and employee must complete the following steps:

- Review the employee's performance plan.
- Conduct the mid-year progress review with the employee, discussing their performance against the objectives and standards documented in his or her performance plan.
- Prepare a written narrative outlining the employee's accomplishments against the standards.
- The narrative should be brief and specific, including examples of performance where appropriate.
- Document comments in EmpowHR.
- Supervisor and employee confirm in EmpowHR that progress review was conducted.

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It is important that supervisors communicate with their employees verbally so that employees understand the comments entered in EmpowHR. This mid-year progress review is the minimum required. You may provide periodic reviews throughout the year as needed to verify progress toward meeting employee performance standards.

This is also an excellent time to review all employees' Individual Development Plans and discuss their progress toward achieving their long term and short term career goals.

In order to assist supervisors in accomplishing this task, Jaia Fischer, Assistant State Conservationist – M&S, will send out reports to each Leadership Team member on April 10, 2017, and again on April 17, 2017, letting them know who has and who has not completed the mid-year progress review process. **It is the supervisor's responsibility to verify completion of this process.**

If you have any questions, contact Jaia Fischer, Assistant State Conservationist – M&S, at (515) 323-2225 or email jaia.fischer@ia.usda.gov.

If your EmpowHR/ICAMS password has expired, contact Shelly Grimmus, Executive Assistant, by email shelly.grimmus@ia.usda.gov.



Kurt Simon
State Conservationist

Attachment – National Bulletin 360-17-20

NB 360-17-20 PER – Conducting Midyear Progress Reviews for Fiscal Year 2017

National Bulletin: 360-17-20

Date: March 16, 2017

Subject: PER – Conducting Midyear Progress Reviews for Fiscal Year 2017

Action Required By: April 30, 2017

Purpose. To provide guidance on fiscal year (FY) 2017 requirements for conducting formal midyear progress reviews by April 30, 2017.

Expiration Date. September 30, 2017

Background.

It is NRCS's policy to establish and actively manage a system that promotes a results-oriented performance culture that contributes to individual and organizational effectiveness and supports the Department's and agency's mission and goals. NRCS' performance management system integrates performance, recognition and performance-related aspects of employee development, training, and pay and links to other related personnel decisions. Monitoring and documenting employees' work efforts are critical to managing and evaluating performance. The monitoring process includes conducting at least one formal progress review during each appraisal period at approximately midway through the rating cycle to discuss the employee's current level of performance. Supervisors are encouraged to provide performance feedback regularly to their employees throughout the performance year to promote an environment that encourages performance discussions.

NRCS's policy for the Performance Management System can be found in the General Manual, Title 360, Part 409, "Performance Management Systems," <http://directives.sc.egov.usda.gov>

Explanation. Supervisors are responsible for monitoring performance that includes offering regular and recurring feedback throughout the rating cycle. "Monitoring" means consistently measuring performance and providing ongoing feedback to employees on their progress toward reaching their goals. Ongoing monitoring provides the opportunity to check how employees are doing and to identify and resolve any problems early. Supervisors must review individual performance goals with each employee to ensure they are still pertinent and an organizational priority. Effective and timely feedback is a critical component of a successful performance management program and should be used in conjunction with setting performance goals, and identifying training needs to improve skills and knowledge level.

Midyear Progress Reviews:

At the midpoint of the performance year, or another appraisal period of at least 180 days, the employee's rating official must conduct at least one formal progress review to ensure that performance elements and standards are appropriate, and to provide the employee with an assessment of current performance. Midyear performance reviews must be conducted with all employees by **April 30, 2017**.

- The progress review does not usually result in either a new appraisal period or a rating. However, any significant changes to an employee's duties, responsibilities, or work assignments should be reflected accurately within the critical elements of the position. If revisions to the performance plan are required, implementation must be completed within 15 days of the action.
- Any significant changes in an employee's duties, responsibilities, or work assignments must be reflected in an updated performance plan within 15 days of the changes.
- Employees on a detail or temporary promotion lasting 90 days or more must have a performance plan and must have an interim rating at the end of the detail or temporary promotion.
- Employees who have been on an established performance plan for at least 60 days as of the date of this bulletin **must** have a progress review between **March 1 and April 30, 2017**.
- Employees without an approved performance plan for the FY 2017 performance period must be placed on one immediately, and must receive a progress review no later than May 31, 2017.

Changes made to a 2017 performance plan must be made in EmpowHR or hard-copy prior to initiating midyear progress reviews.

Performance Monitoring:

Performance Monitoring

Monitoring performance is the process of observing an employee's performance results and collecting data on those results during the appraisal period. At a minimum, supervisors are required to evaluate employee performance against the elements and measurable standards in each of their employees' performance plans at a midyear progress review and at the yearend summary rating. The following steps guide you through the process of a midyear progress review:

- Review the employee's performance plan.
- Conduct the midyear progress review with the employee, discussing their performance against the performance objectives and standards documented in his or her performance plan.
- Prepare a written narrative outlining the employee's accomplishments against the standards.
- The narrative should be brief and specific, including examples of performance where appropriate.
- Document comments in the progress review comment block in EmpowHR.
- Supervisor and employee confirm in EmpowHR that progress review was conducted.

See NRCS People SharePoint site for tips on writing performance narratives, preparing for and conducting the midyear review, and instructions for documenting midyear progress reviews in EmpowHR.

Midyear Performance Review Checklist:

Holding successful midyear performance discussions requires preparation. Appraising officials can use the following checklist as a tool to help them prepare for employee appraisal reviews. Supervisors should have all the necessary tools close at hand before starting to write the appraisal narrative, including:

- A copy of the employee's performance plan and position description;
- Notes of previous meetings with the employee (remember what was discussed with the employee during previous meetings);
- Written feedback on employee performance from other sources (these can include letters of appreciation, customer feedback, etc.); and
- Appraisal program instructions that describe the performance midyear review process and procedures.

Performance Feedback:

Performance feedback should be an ongoing process that communicates expectations and what employees should continue doing, stop doing, do less of, or start doing. The feedback process gives supervisors the opportunity to make changes to unrealistic or problematic standards. It also allows supervisors to identify unacceptable performance at any time during the appraisal period. When focusing on performance management as an ongoing, year-round process, the focus shifts from "justifying a rating" at the end of the year to continually improving performance. See NRCS People SharePoint site for tips on providing effective feedback as well a series of manager guides on monitoring and improving employee performance.

Feedback should be objective and fact-based. When providing feedback, supervisors should avoid making judgments that inhibit impartiality, such as the use of subjective criteria and rater bias. See NRCS People SharePoint site for tips for recognizing rater bias.

When providing performance feedback, certain elements are needed to ensure its effectiveness:

- **Specificity:** Feedback works best when it relates to a specific goal. Establishing employee performance expectations and goals before work begins is the key to providing tangible, objective, and powerful feedback.
- **Timeliness:** Employees should receive information about how they are doing as timely as possible. If improvement needs to be made in their performance, the sooner they find out about it the sooner they can correct the problem.
- **Manner:** Feedback should be given in a manner that will best help improve their performance. Since people respond better to information presented in a positive way, feedback should be expressed in a positive manner. This is not to say that information should be sugar-coated, but it must be accurate, factual, and complete.

Additional resources include an online training course on feedback to provide supervisors and staff members with techniques for giving and receiving feedback. This course is available in AgLearn and is titled "USDA NRCS Giving and Receiving Feedback." The course number is NRCS-NEDC-000261.

Performance Plan Changes:

Supervisors should use the midyear progress review as an opportunity to make changes to the employee's performance plan, as appropriate. Plans may be revised to reflect new organizational goals, outside influences beyond an employee's control that make the original goals and standards unachievable, changes in work assignments, or new organizational or management priorities.

When changes are made to the performance objectives or corresponding standards within an element, employees must be informed of the changes, and given the opportunity to perform under the modified standards for a period of at least 90 days. The last day to make changes to performance standards for this performance appraisal period is August 14, 2017. When changes are made to performance objectives and/or standards, the performance appraisal period may be extended to November 14, 2017, which affords the employees an opportunity to perform the duties for a minimum of 90 days before the end of the appraisal period.

The following steps serve as a guide for making changes to an employee's performance plan:

- Review the employee's performance plan.
- Conduct the midyear progress review with the employee, discussing performance against the objectives and standards documented in the corresponding performance plan.
- Prepare a written narrative outlining the employee's accomplishments toward those standards.
- Prepare a narrative that is brief and specific, including examples of performance where appropriate.
- Document comments in the rating official's progress review comment block in EmpowHR.
- Both the supervisor and the employee should confirm, in EmpowHR, that the progress review occurred.

Addressing Performance Problems:

Supervisors and managers are encouraged to contact their servicing human resources office for additional advice and guidance when addressing performance problems. Regular and recurring feedback is a critical aspect of effective performance management, and is especially important in identifying and addressing shortcomings early in the appraisal period. At any time during the appraisal period that an employee's performance is determined to be less than "Fully Successful" in one or more critical elements, the rating official must—

- Notify the employee, in writing, of the critical elements for which performance is below the "Fully Successful" level.
- Inform the employee of the performance requirements or standards that must be attained to demonstrate acceptable performance. The rating official should inform the employee that, unless his or her performance in the critical elements improves to and is sustained at a satisfactory level, the employee may be reassigned, reduced in grade, or removed.

It is critical for supervisors to address either of these scenarios without delay, and avoid permitting employees' to unknowingly proceed with poor performance.

Performance Improvement Plan (PIP):

Rating and reviewing officials should continue to monitor any evolving performance issues and take immediate action as necessary, rather than waiting until the end of the performance year to initiate corrective steps. Extensions of the rating period to accommodate a PIP shall only be granted in limited circumstances, such as when an employee's performance is consistently at or above the "Fully Successful" level throughout the performance year, and only falls below that in late July or August. **A PIP for the 2017 performance year must be in place no later than August 31, 2017.** The rating period must be formally extended and completed no later than November 14, 2017, and the 2017 performance rating of record must be given within 15 days of the end of the PIP. **There is no provision to extend a PIP beyond**

November 14, 2017. If a PIP is not in place by August 31st, the employee must be given a 2017 summary rating by October 30, 2017.

Accountability Requirements:

Each rating official is responsible for ensuring the completion of the midyear progress reviews of their employees. Once the formal midyear review is completed, the rating official and employee must initial the performance plan (AD-435E or AD-435S) within EmpowHR or hard copy if completed outside of EmpowHR.

In addition to the long standing mandate that supervisors conduct midyear reviews, there is a specific measure in the **Department's Cultural Transformation FY 2016 Action Plan** that the performance plans of all managers and supervisors include standards that hold the supervisor or manager accountable for the performance management of subordinates. Full compliance with the requirements in this bulletin will be a significant factor in achieving those performance standards, for both first-line supervisors and the managers to whom they report, as they are in turn accountable for overseeing the responsibilities of their subordinate supervisors.

Departmental Regulation (DR) 4040-430, dated October 1, 2013, describes **new impacts upon the rating and reviewing officials' "Leadership/Management" and "Supervision" element ratings** when rating and reviewing officials fail to meet deadlines and/or overall performance management expectations. The DR states: "Failure to meet the performance management deadlines established by OHRM and/or the supervisor's agency or staff office should, at a minimum, preclude an element rating of Exceeds Fully Successful. Failure to meet the requirements in the Performance Management category altogether should result in an element rating of Does Not Meet Fully Successful. Likewise, the second-level supervisor's Leadership/Management and/or Supervision element rating should reflect the degree to which the first-line supervisor was held accountable for his or her performance management responsibilities."

Tracking and Reporting Requirements:

Rating officials are responsible for ensuring completion of midyear progress reviews for their assigned employees.

Reviewing officials are responsible for ensuring rating officials carry out their performance management responsibilities, and so evaluating the rating officials to ensure accountability for performance management.

The Performance and Compensation Branch will provide advice, guidance, resources and bi-weekly reports beginning March 20, 2017, to customers to help ensure the established deadlines for midyear reviews are met.

NOTE: Any adjustments to the reports (such as employee ineligibility for a midyear progress review, or a delayed progress review) must be promptly reported to the Performance and Compensation Branch, by email at PerfCompintake@wdc.usda.gov.

Contact. If you have any questions regarding midyear progress reviews, contact the Performance and Compensation Branch by email at PerfCompintake@wdc.usda.gov.

/s/

THOMAS W. CHRISTENSEN
Associate Chief for Operations